AMO REPORTS 82-15

FOSTER CARE: PROPOSED STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR AGENCIES PLACING CHILDREN

THE ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES OF ONTARIO
AUGUST 1982

ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES OF ONTARIO

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario, a non-partisan voluntary organization, is united to promote the values of the municipal government system and the status of the municipal level of government as a vital and essential component of the total intergovernmental framework of Ontario and Canada.

The Association acts as the collective voice of Ontario's municipal governments and is organized to accomplish through cooperation and coordination, what the majority have neither the time nor the resources to do individually.

The Association represents some six hundred (600) municipal governments throughout Ontario. The governing body is composed of some eighty (80) municipal elected and appointed officials, who in turn represent a wide-range of municipal government interest.

The following sections and affiliated municipal professional associations form an important part of the Association's structure and therefore, play an important part in its activities in terms of the Board of Directors, program and policy development:

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* Northern Ontario Section (FONOM/NOMA)
* Rural (ROMA) Section
* Organization of Small Urban Municipalities Section

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FOSTER CARE:

PROPOSED STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR AGENCIES PLACING CHILDREN

BACKGROUND

The report Foster Care: Proposed Standards and Guidelines for Agencies Placing Children is part of an ongoing process in the reorganization of foster care, which has continued for over three years. The Province released Foster Care: A Discussion Paper in September, 1979, which contained an overview of the entire area of foster care, and addressed the critical issue of declining use and availability of foster homes. The major problems regarding foster care policy cited in that 1979 paper were the total lack of standardization, definition of case loads, role and status of social workers and foster parents, and compensation. Remedial suggestions included clear definitions of different types of foster care; publicity and recruitment campaigns, and selection, training and development of foster parents.

The Association responded to the Foster Care discussion paper in January 1980. At that time the Association expressed concern around the definition of case loads and the standardization of rates. The Association's recommendations endorsed the provincial efforts to reorganize the foster care program, suggested provincial-municipal consultation on the formulation of new and/or revised standards and guidelines, and required that the Province not eliminate alternatives to foster care until such times as the new incentives, policy and rate structure were in place and proven effective.

The track record of meeting these expressed provincial and municipal goals has been about 50 percent. The Province has attempted to clarify the definition of foster care particularly within the context of the group homes discussions. They have not, however, dealt with the whole question and definition of special foster care. The Province did conduct a recruitment and publicity campaign, but follow-up and continuity has been poor. The Province has established the position of Foster Care Co-ordinator in the four regions of the Province, allowing for some ongoing training and development of foster parents. The Province has also undertaken a fairly ambitious research project to determine what works and is successful in the area of foster care.

As a result of the January 1980 resolution and PMLC process, the Association (then the MLC) appointed a representative to the Foster Care Steering Committee, a body which examined, formulated and recommended foster care policy to the Ministry. This ensured that the municipal concerns were heard, and that the municipal role was considered in the revamping of the foster care system. The municipal concern regarding the standardization of foster care rates has been partially dealt with. A standardized system of rates has been developed, and the Province has begun to equalize rates across the Province, with a $1.2 million initiative (100% Provincial dollars) distributed to Children's Aid Societies this year. Insofar as the elimination of alternatives to foster care, particularly residential alternatives, is concerned, the Province has virtually ignored the Association's 1980 resolution. The closure by the Province of training schools and the elimination of a large number of beds in a variety of settings which provided residential care is indicative of the provincial agenda to cut costs, regardless of the impact on the community.

ISSUES

The major principles and recommendations outlined in the provincial document, Foster Care: Proposed Standards and Guidelines for Agencies Placing Children, do not pose a problem for the Association. Many of the specifics regarding assessment, planning and care of the child are reflective of the Association's position that quality foster care should be available and accessible throughout the Province. The format of both the consultation paper and the reply booklet should enable those interested parties and agencies to reply to the specific proposed standards and/or guidelines quickly and easily. Most of those specifics are not of concern to the Association except in a general way.

The issues which concern the Association revolve around definitions, clarification of roles and responsibilities, inclusion of GWA foster care children, and costs.

Discussion must take place and agreement be reached on what constitutes a "reasonable" person as well as how an "agency" is defined. Throughout the discussion paper reference is made to what is "reasonable". It is felt that a firm definition should replace that phrase, as what appears reasonable to one person is not always in

the best interest to the child. Similarly, the entire gambit of the proposed standards and guidelines are applicable to agencies placing children. However, the Province has not defined "agency" saying this is open for discussion and could be either an individual, a private company, or a child-serving agency, although not necessarily the Children's Aid Society. It would seem that this lack of definition does nothing to contribute to the discussion on foster care standards and guidelines. The Province should clarify its intent towards responsible agencies as soon as possible. Consideration should also be taken into account of the Local Children's Services Committees and municipalities in formulating this definition.

Roles and responsibilities within the new foster care system also require clarification. The issues of who does what have not been dealt with. Who will ensure agencies are complying with standards? Who will monitor the foster home? Who will be responsible for follow through? These issues must be addressed before the standards are implemented, and consultation on many of the physical aspects of the requirements (i.e. fire, safety, health) should be discussed with the municipalities.

There are a fairly large number of children who are directly or indirectly recipients of General Welfare Assistance under the foster care program. It is the opinion of the Association that this population should not be excluded from the benefits of quality foster care, ensured by the proposed standards and guidelines. The position raises the issue of direct municipal involvement in the area of foster care vis-a-vis enforcement of standards, as well as liability for the lack of enforcement. This must be an item for further provincial-municipal discussion. It stands to reason that one of the major agencies responsible for the implementation and enforcement of these standards will be and should be the Children's Aid Societies. Given the rigorous nature of the standards, implementation is bound to cost the Societies - exactly how much is unknown at this time. While the Association supports the implementation of these standards, it is our opinion that the entire cost should be borne by the Province, thus ensuring a quality and equity of care across the Province.

CONCLUSIONS

While the reorganization of the foster care system has been protracted, the method of consultation and conciliation employed by the Province must be recommended. The continued Provincial efforts to improve the foster care system and to ensure quality care for foster children throughout Ontario is commended. The outstanding municipal issues regarding definitions, roles and responsibilities, inclusion of GWA foster children, and cost issues must be resolved via continued dialogue between the municipalities and the Province.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The Association continues to support the provincial initiatives to improve the quality of foster care throughout Ontario.

2) The Association encourages the Province to resolve the issues surrounding special foster care, to ensure those children with special needs have equal access to quality foster care.

3) The Association requires that all questions regarding definition of terms, roles and responsibilities, be resolved before the Province implements new standards and guidelines for foster care.

4) The Association requires that the Provincial review of the foster care system include an examination of how foster children on GWA can be included under any Provincial standards and guidelines.

5) The Province of Ontario must assume all costs related to the implementation of new and/or revised standards and guidelines for foster care.

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